

# Archived Information

## **LSS RESPONSE TO THE PANEL SYNTHESIS REPORT ON THE INTERIM EVALUATION OF LSS**

This response to the synthesis report on the Interim Evaluation of the Laboratory for Student Success (LSS), the mid-Atlantic regional educational laboratory at Temple University Center for Research in Human Development and Education, is organized under two sections. In the first section, we discuss how the panel's findings provided a credible database for identifying the defining characteristics of the work of LSS in finding its “niche” as a regional educational laboratory that serves the states and schools in the mid-Atlantic region, and as the lead laboratory with a specialty area on urban education reform. In the second section, we address the organizational concerns noted by the panel.

### **DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF THE WORK OF LSS AND THE “LSS NICHE”**

#### **Defining Characteristics of LSS**

The following emerging defining characteristics of the LSS are based on the panel’s analysis of the first three years of the LSS’ operation as a new regional educational laboratory:

- A strong leadership team in place that not only meets or exceeds its contract expectations, but has gained increasing recognition and visibility as a resource that is accessible to states and schools in the region in timely and helpful ways. The reviewer panel noted that LSS “...has a large presence in the region and progress is being made toward a national reputation.” The panel noted that evidence exists that the various LSS programs contribute to improved school conditions and have positive student impact, particularly in inner city and isolated rural schools with high concentrations of students from economically and educationally disadvantaged circumstances.
- A data-driven self-monitoring process for planning and improving its on-going operations to respond to “client” feedback and needs. This quality assurance process has created a culture of continuous improvement at LSS, but is also recognized by its customers as one that values their feedback and evaluation. Impact and suggestions are taken seriously. They are used to customize services and products that are tailored to the needs of the field through the use of a variety of media and partnership-based outreach mechanisms.
- A research and development capacity is in place for product and service development. LSS’ capacity as an R&D resource is receiving increasing recognition for high quality and useful products and services that are widely accessible and used by customers. User representatives from national, regional, state, and local organizations interviewed by the panel characterized LSS work within the larger constellation of available research and technical assistance as: “...the work is non-political, high quality, research-based and not biased,” “...LSS fits a niche that the SEA, universities, and national reform innovations can't fill,” and “...LSS is having a direct impact on the classroom.”
- The laboratory provides a strong mentoring environment for minority researchers and an organizational culture that values diversity, especially its responsiveness, quality of programs, and collegiality.

## **The “LSS Niche”**

The mission of the Laboratory for Student Success is to play a pivotal role in the educational reform process throughout the mid-Atlantic region to significantly improve the region’s capacity for bringing about lasting improvements in the healthy development and educational success of its increasingly diverse student population. In the assessment by the panel, several areas of strengths were noted that suggest the developing “LSS niche” in meeting its mission mandates and in serving the mid-Atlantic region and its leadership to enhance the capacity of a national network of R&D resource and service delivery is meeting this nation’s pressing urban education reform needs.

### ***Toward Building a Procedural Knowledge Base***

The reviewers highlighted how LSS’ programmatic emphasis on building the capacity of the states and schools in achieving student success is closely linked to the Laboratory’s focus on procedural knowledge development in its program of applied research and development work. As one panelist reported: “LSS takes its commitment to the development of ‘procedural knowledge’ seriously. The concept expresses in other terms [what has been called] ‘actionable knowledge’ needed to foster effective utilization of theory and research...[a] knowledge that is rare in many domains of action, and education is chief among them. Thus, the notion of developing such knowledge is conceptually important. It appears moreover that the Lab has effectively aligned its programs, field development and dissemination to support this concept. One has the impression that the linkage of research and improvement in this Lab is actually contributing to the development of actionable findings and programs.”

As noted in the panel’s synthesis report, “A theme of ‘scaling up’ typifies concern among the panel in this area. The current (and approved) approach concentrates essentially on structure, but it neglects some essential content. That is, there is a good strategy in place for creating awareness, for developing understanding, for bringing role groups together for potential future collaborations and for reaching large numbers of people.” These concerns are at the core of the LSS program of work, particularly with its network of schools where LSS is providing intensive development and implementation support in establishing and maintaining research-based reform practices.

A niche contributing to building a procedural knowledge is developing from the LSS strengths in foregrounding procedural knowledge in its applied research, program and product development, information dissemination, and outreach activities. These strengths are complemented by collaborative field work that focuses on promoting understanding and development of associated conditional knowledge among its collaborators interested in building a knowledge base on how to scale up reform practices that are known to be effective in achieving student success.

During the past three years, LSS has strategically created a network of over 200 schools where intensive collaborative work in implementing site-based reform efforts is ongoing. LSS has in the past, and continually learns from these collaborating rural and urban schools about the conditions for effective implementation and strategies for scaling up implementation at the school, district and state levels. Some of these schools serve as co-development sites, some serve as demonstration and training centers, and some are in initial implementation stages of their reform program.

A major focus of this developing niche of procedural knowledge development is on building a database on conditions under which knowledge of what works is utilized. An increased ability to know when to apply what one learns and how to apply it in site-specific contexts is a critical information base for those who are interested in learning about how to effectively implement research-based reform practices.

### ***A National Information and Assistance Resource for Enhancing Urban Education Reform***

One of the most pressing educational reform needs of this country is to improve our capacity for the healthy development and educational success of children and youth who live in some of the most adverse life circumstances with multiple co-occurring risks. The picture that emerges from the research base on the development and education of children and families in this nation's urban communities is a startling juxtaposition of despair and hope, disorganization and potential. In spite of the problems that surround them, many remarkably resilient urban youngsters mature into healthy, competent adults. The overarching goal of the LSS urban education reform enhancement program was to identify and nurture the positives in youngsters' lives to rekindle hope and suggest how urban schools can better help their students fulfill their hopes and dreams to the greater benefit of our entire society.

LSS chose "fostering educational resilience" as a focus to connect research and practice to significantly improve our nation's capacity for urban education reform. This LSS focus on expanding its knowledge base on how to utilize the positives of the urban community to achieve learning success of its young people has gained increasing recognition as a powerful strategy to "scale up" what can be done in the service of student success—an LSS niche for capacity building. As noted by the panel: "...there is overwhelming evidence from all sources examined that LSS has indeed established a regional and national reputation in its specialty area of urban education, and continues to build on this reputation."

Two strategies that have significantly expanded the LSS efforts to create this urban education niche are (a) building on the existing strength by forging strategic alliances, and (b) hosting broad-based national discussion forums, focusing on emerging and pressing reform issues. Both strategies have helped in establishing a national reputation for LSS as a leading organizational resource for enhancing urban education reform. For example, as noted by the panel: "Conference agendas emanate from syntheses of research in a manner that is useful to practice and policy audiences, and that fosters interactions among researchers, practitioners, policy makers and other cross-role groups. The conferences culminate with a delineation of 'next steps' needed to improve practice policy and research. Collaboration with 'strategic partners' strengthens the quality of the conferences and the quality and result of the dissemination." The panel further noted that "...the Lab brings in top caliber individuals—both researchers and practitioners—around issues of national, boundary-spanning importance."

LSS is increasingly sought by policy makers and practitioners as an informational and assistance resource for helping in informed decision-making and planning for implementation to meet their reform needs. This is a niche LSS is prepared to fill in this nation's quest for urban education reform to ensure high standards of educational outcomes for a diversity of students, particularly from schools in the urban communities that we are challenged to serve.

### ***A Model for Implementing Comprehensive Approach to School Reform***

One of the signature works of the LSS is the development of scaling up strategies to implement a comprehensive approach to school reform, known as the Community for Learning (CFL) program. This research-based model is based on over two decades of field-based development and demonstration in hundreds of schools across varied geographic regions. It was cited as an example of a research-based comprehensive school reform model in the November 1997 Congressional Report on the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) legislation.

The capacity-building approach to implementing CSRD and its data-driven framework for guiding implementation and self-monitoring mechanisms for improved implementation, have gained increasing recognition by practitioners as critical elements that are generic to comprehensive school reform that builds on the strengths and needs of local schools. As a result, LSS is being asked to provide assistance to schools that are not implementing CFL but want to use CFL's data-based approach to develop school leadership capacity on how to conduct needs assessments and plan for using other reform practices that schools may wish to implement. As noted by the panel, "...because CFL is highly data-driven, LSS often ends up working with districts and states both to improve their collection of data and to help analyze data. This goes well beyond what is actually called for in implementing the CFL model, but it proves to be an extremely valuable service for the district or state overall, with benefits that may go well beyond the CFL sites."

This LSS niche is built on the demonstration of feasibility of CFL schools in implementing a research-based comprehensive school improvement model, and achieving results within a reasonable amount of time. Indeed, some even show significant improvement in schooling success of students within the first year of implementation. The ability to develop an implementation plan with a site-specific delivery system is at the core of success of any reform effort by schools. Schools are pressing for assistance in establishing and sustaining their respective reform efforts, and LSS is poised to meet this assistance need. As one panelist noted: "That is, the Lab is not simply responding to customer needs; it is engendering customers' appreciation of a new way to think about schooling and their expectations for its quality, direction, and output. In this regard, the Lab appears to be successfully creating a new market for CSR."

### **RESPONSE TO ORGANIZATIONAL CONCERNS**

Nearly all of the organizational concerns expressed in the synthesis report and in the individual reviewers reports are topics that are in continuing discussion at LSS as a part of our self-monitoring process to plan and refine our work. We are pleased to learn of the consistency in our self-analysis and those of the panelists. We welcome this venue to respond to these concerns by briefly highlighting what is already in place to address the issues raised and discuss plans for the continuing improvement and growth we seek at LSS as a regional educational lab. We will address each area of organizational concern in the sequence listed in the synthesis report.

***A concern was raised that a great deal of the effectiveness of the LSS appears to rest upon the special skills, energy and relationships of the Executive Director. How can LSS institutionalize the many contributions of its Executive Director...***

This institutionalization concern is addressed from two perspectives at LSS. First, the Executive Director has focused on recruiting and developing a leadership team during the first 18

months of the Lab's operations. Evidence of this aspect of capacity building was acknowledged by the panel who noted in their synthesis report that: "A strong leadership team is in place." The special skills, energy, and relationships with LSS stakeholder groups by the leadership team is growing and expected to continue to grow as LSS' leadership team gains increasing recognition through their work and contacts with the field.

The second, while it's complimentary to credit the accomplishments of the past three years of LSS to its Executive Director, we view this as a way of defining the required leadership characteristics of the executive director of a regional educational laboratory. Rather than being concerned about the strong role of the executive director, it would seem more appropriate to review the quality of the individual who occupies this position. It is our strong belief that the executive director of a regional educational laboratory must have: a national reputation and be a respected leader in the field among his or her colleagues; a clear vision of the mission of the laboratory; the ability to provide substantive leadership in defining and implementing a comprehensive scope of work that is research-based and field responsive; the ability to recruit and nurture diverse talents among the staff in building the intellectual capital of the lab; the ability to provide administrative and intellectual leadership and directions to accomplish the required congressional mandates of regional educational laboratories, under the direction of its Governing Board of Directors; has his/her finger on the pulse of emerging and pressing issues from the field; the knowledge of how to make connections to expand the capacity of the lab; the ability to elicit and mobilize support from other institutions and individuals whose work could greatly enhance the capacity of the Lab, while being mindful of giving such support to others in return in building a national network of R&D resources in the service of student success.

These are some of the characteristics of the present LSS Executive Director that have contributed to the LSS' success. Indeed, the LSS Governing Board of Directors has evaluated the Executive Director in these terms, as they are the recognized characteristics required of any CEO of a major enterprise to build institutional capacity. These characteristics are also what contribute to the institutionalization of the Lab's success. A leader with lesser qualities would not be able to fill the leadership demands of a major R&D resource in the country, while building a strong leadership team to bring LSS to the forefront of capacity building to meet the needs of national urban educational reform.

***One area of concern is the type and timing of the feedback data collected by the Lab. Some panelists felt that the relative impacts of critical dimensions of CFL's process are not tracked or studied to their full potential...***

Community for Learning (CFL) is one of the signature works of LSS. Documentation of degree of implementation is central to implementing the CFL's databased professional development program. It provides a framework for planning and monitoring and refining implementation of the CFL by the individual staff and collective accomplishments school-wide. This is also a part of the overall design that addresses the "scaling-up" issue of CFL. Thus, LSS is in total agreement with the panel that this is an area that CFL developers and schools implementing CFL must pay significant attention to as they develop strategies for wide-scale implementation across varied geographic regions and in schools with diverse characteristics and needs. The credibility of the LSS in addressing this concern is exemplified in the following statements made by individual panelists:

"One of the first steps in determining whether or not the Lab's work is contributing to student success is putting a sound model for measurement in place. In sites where CFL is in place, the Lab monitors changes in teacher behavior related to the degree

of implementation of the CFL model and examines the target district's data to measure student achievement progress. The degree of each teacher's program implementation is measured twice a year in relation to twelve comprehensive measures (comprised of over 200 subdomains) covering areas such as arranging space/facilities, creating and maintaining instructional materials, and other measures deemed by research to be important to making instructional gains. While not designed as a personnel evaluation tool, this assessment is used to determine what the teacher needs to work on next in terms of curriculum and instruction. Teachers are given an in-depth feedback sheet on how they are doing in those critical dimensions, with indication for areas of needed support. As a school, the report gives a total picture of the degree of implementation, and these reports can be combined across sites to create a total district report."

"Community for Learning has developed a built-in monitoring and evaluation process through which participating schools regularly assess the degree of program implementation and use a systematic degree of implementation assessment instrument. LSS staff assigned to the school observe the classroom teaching and learning process regularly to assess the extent to which the degree of program implementation results in improved classroom process. Student achievement is monitored daily through a diagnostic-prescription process that teachers use in developing individualized learning plans for each student."

We would like to note the misleading context of the "two forms" of the evaluation data on the CFL program that were given as examples in the synthesis report. Both forms were indeed available and are an integral part of the implementation of CFL. It is correct that the presentation of the data focuses on the LSS-supported schools, which have only had two years of data, since LSS had only been in existence for three years. The LSS staff put together the degree of implementation data from other schools that had more than two years' worth of data per the request of the individual reviewer. However, he decided he did not need the information after the information was assembled.

The outcome data on student achievement at sites other than at the DC schools where CFL was being implemented was included in the presentation and in the signature work binder prepared for the panel. In fact, the availability of the data was cited in another section of the synthesis report on the impact of CFL:

"At a middle school in inner city Philadelphia (the one visited by the Review Panelists during their site visit) where 78 percent of students are Latino and 93 percent live below the poverty line, students have shown significantly higher academic progress than students at a control school. A follow-up study of students who had attended this middle school reported that they had a significantly lower dropout rate than their high school peers (19 percent vs. 60 percent) and that 48 percent of them were performing at grade level in the eleventh grade compared to 26 percent of their peers. A similarly situated elementary school in Houston also witnessed improvements in student achievement, along with positive changes in students' and teachers' attitudes about their school."

Another area of concern expressed by the panel is that the "CFL model values teachers as instructors and implementers, but seems to lack in valuing their capacity to reflect, articulate and document their experience." An integral design of the CFL is capacity building through teacher learning as individuals and in teams. We believe this assessment may reflect the first stage of teacher development of the CFL implementation, focusing on high degree of implementation of the

12 critical dimensions. CFL attaches great value to promoting teachers' active reflection upon and representations of their experiences—teachers' growing abilities to self-direct their learning and professional development and self-evaluate their progress. For example, LSS is implementing a variety of ways to encourage self-reflection and representation of experience on the part of teachers. These include on-line collaboration environments that enable teachers to share comments, concerns, and successes with each other and with CFL developers and the LSS implementation assistance staff. Capitalizing on these collaboration technologies, not merely because of the quick and widespread access to each other they provide participants, but also because of the ways participants can use these tools to organize their reflections hierarchically and visually. They can create a public database built on documentation of their experiences. This is being done using simple networked journals in our learning technologies projects and in expanding our use of more complex channels for teacher reflection and requests for assistance as we link participating CFL schools to each other and to CFL implementers on-line.

***One panelist felt strongly that LSS research publications are not written in a user-friendly style or readily accessible to practitioners...***

The need for LSS published material to be more “user-friendly” to the wide range of LSS “customer groups” while still maintaining the substantive integrity of the research findings has been an area of continuous self-imposed challenge by the LSS staff. LSS has received high marks for its publication series that are targeted for specific audiences. Indeed, LSS publications and products have been widely recognized as a major strength of LSS. The strength of the Lab’s publication efforts is substantiated by many of the evaluation notes listed under “Strengths” in the panel’s synthesis report:

- National, regional, and state recognition is received for products and services
- Developed products and services are useful to and used by customers
- Customers are identified and products are tailored to their needs
- Client testimonials suggest products and services are of high quality
- Work made available by a variety of media

Making research-based products stakeholder-friendly and accessible to a wide variety of users is a universal challenge—a procedural knowledge that will continue to be a priority of LSS’ scope of work. As the LSS develops new product formats—including print and electronic publications—LSS expects to acquire increasing expertise to connect research and practice. The Lab strives to make deep knowledge content more readable for a wide variety of stakeholders, while incorporating the perspectives and needs of its clients into the co-development process. In fact, leading practitioners have joined the Lab in providing their expertise to ensure that the products and services are enriched by practitioner insights and evaluate their usefulness.

We agree with the need to continue to improve the quality, usefulness, and usability of our products and services. However, we, along with some of the reviewers, do not agree with the statement made by the one panelist that “LSS research publications are not written in user-friendly style or readily accessible to practitioners.” In fact, during the discussion at the exit interview, when the individual was asked to give specific examples of LSS publications that she views as “dumbing down the content through a reductionistic translation process” or publications that “may now be over-translating research to practitioners, providing over-simplified interpretations of the literature in the form of checklist or user-friendly ‘to do’ processes without supplying the conceptual framework that undergirds the work,” none were given. She did, however, use the Education Week article *Comprehensive School Reform... Can Debunk Myths About Change* as an

example of what she referred to as “...not dumbing-down the content...”

The following are specific examples of LSS publications that individual reviewers have noted:

“The Lab has been extremely productive in research and development output. A large range of books, What Works, Spotlights, and other materials has been produced. These products meet one test of quality in that they have been selected for commercial publication or they have appeared in refereed journals or in reputable, selective publications like ED WEEK. Members of the Board of Governors and the Stakeholder Board praise the quality of these products.”

“The publication of the proceedings in refereed journals and the review processes of their widely respected publishers, such as Laurence Erlbaum Publisher, are additional indicators of the quality of the series. Further quality is evidenced by the request for copies of conference proceedings by LSS stakeholder groups and requests for follow-up activities.”

“Short research reviews such as *Spotlight on Student Success* and other translation processes reduce lengthy interpretations to more concise, manageable ‘bites’ of information, and research-based products and processes that complete the empirical journey.”

***Most interviewees involved in school reform efforts talked about a wide variety of positive changes in teacher, student and parental behaviors within their schools that are not as easily measurable or quantifiable as student scores on achievement tests...LSS can make an important contribution to the school change literature and to the “procedural knowledge base” by attending to those “other” successes...***

We totally agree with the panel’s assessment and appreciated the encouraging remarks about the ongoing efforts at LSS to expand both data and the accessibility of information to the schools and school districts we work with. LSS has made the need to develop a broader range of school and student outcome data a priority. As noted in the report of a panelist:

“Their (LSS) work involves needs assessment information, teacher attitude surveys, and other demographic information along with test results. These data are analyzed, and based on research findings related to best practices and methods of attacking the learning and environmental needs for the school and students...After careful review of the exhibits and testimonies it is determined that all of the major indicators are met, and that the tasks promised by LSS are met.”

***How can a strong network of CFL schools support each other and continue to provide the capacity for ongoing implementation even if LSS personnel no longer have a direct relationship with the schools?***

Capacity building is a major LSS assistance goal with all its collaborating schools, including those implementing the CFL program. It is a built-in design concern for establishing and maintaining a high degree of program implementation and for developing a procedural knowledge base on how to scale-up implementation at remote locations. Indeed, the question of how to maintain a relationship with the schools after the CFL implementation is well established, and how much is enough, is a topic of LSS’ developing procedural knowledge on conditions for sustaining



reform success.

One example is the CFL emphasis on teacher learning and their self-reflection on the implementation experience. A continuing renewing element of our design is the forming of the CFL network through the use of learning technologies being developed as a part of the LSS technical assistance and professional development delivery system. This system includes video and database technologies that can be used to distribute solution strategies, a web-accessible Listserv, and databases of frequently asked questions, case-based scenarios, field experiences, and other resources that schools can use to sustain programs.

We at LSS view the continuing professional development support as an ongoing concern of all professions. The issue that needs to be addressed is not “whether or not LSS will maintain direct relationships with its collaborating schools.” Our concern is how to develop a sustaining mechanism for continual learning of all involved, and how LSS’ role will provide such professional renewal and continuing professional development, in ways to incorporate new ideas and advances in research and practical improvements on an ongoing basis. Thus, the question of how much direct input is needed to sustain reform success and what role LSS plays in how to more effectively provide such support are important areas for investigation as we systematically document and monitor our delivery of assistance services.

### **Concluding Remarks**

LSS would like to go on record as applauding the usefulness of the interim evaluation process and the utmost professional standards followed by DIR and the panel. It was an opportunity for LSS to take stock of what has been accomplished in its first three years of operation as a new regional educational laboratory and receive a keen sense of external validation of its on-going self-assessment of progress. We found the panel's findings based on the four key criteria used to conduct this interim evaluation of the regional educational laboratories insightful. More importantly, the assessments of the panel have stimulated much rethinking and planning at LSS on how to stay the course based on our strengths and make mid-term corrections in areas where LSS should pay special attention to improving its delivery, even in light of the overall positive appraisal of the quality of the work of LSS and the panel's determination that “...the Lab [LSS] meets or exceeds its contract expectations.”